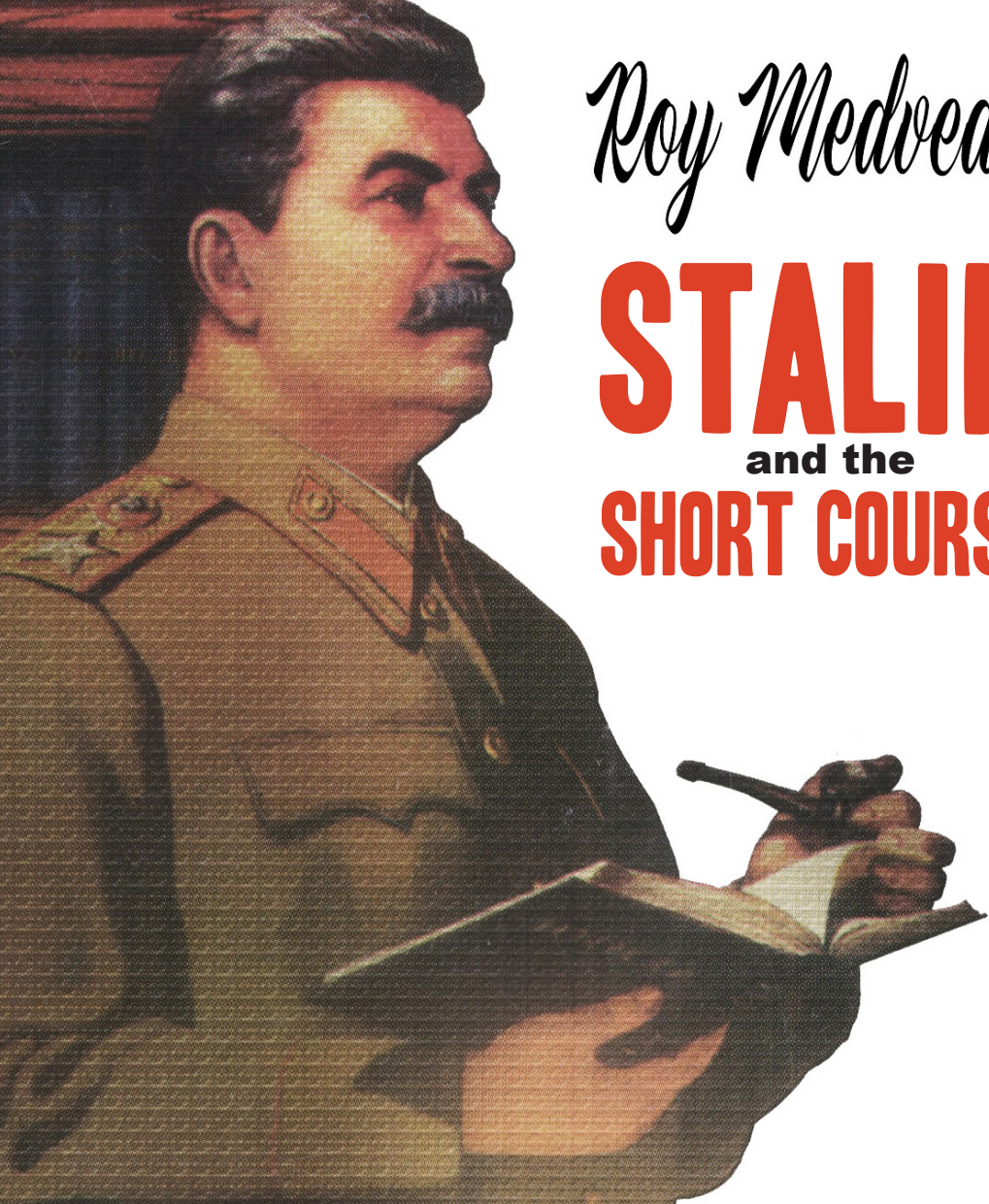




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STALIN

and the

SHORT COURSE

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Stalin and the *Short Course*

[2004]

by Roy Medvedev

Edited by Tim Davenport

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STALIN AND THE *SHORT COURSE*

The “Bible of Communism”

All world religions are founded on their own “sacred scriptures,” which did not immediately take the form of books like the Bible or the Quran. Yet the world ideologies of the 19th and 20th centuries were also built upon the works and teachings of their founders, which within totalitarian ideological movements and political structures gave rise to new forms of “sacred scripture.” The world or the country was presented with books that claimed to encompass and explain everything, thereby serving as the foundation of public consciousness, a regulator of citizens’ behavior, and a justification for a particular system of power. One such book was the *History of the VKP(B): Short Course*, created under the guidance and with the decisive participation of I.V. Stalin. It was one of the first history books I read—in the autumn of 1938, at the age of 13, in the newspaper *Pravda*. Subsequently, this book, albeit to varying degrees, accompanied each of us who chose history or philosophy as a profession throughout our lives.

Marxism emerged and developed in the 19th century not as a totalitarian sect based on orthodoxy and a cult of personality, but as a new economic and philosophical concept and as a socio-political movement intended not only to explain the world but also to change it. This movement had its founders and authorities, its teachers and disciples, yet it was free of both monopoly and dictatorship. Both Marx and Engels laid claim to the scientific nature of their concepts—to objective rather than absolute truth. In

so doing, they rejected not only the contemporary world of bourgeois relations and values but also all religions. The study of Marxism typically began with the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and concluded with the first volume of *Capital*. At the time, however, no one regarded these books as “sacred scripture.” The founders of Marxism developed their views through debate, they welcomed the efforts of their disciples and followers to expand the scope of Marxist methods and principles in every direction. Yet, even then, a specific orthodoxy began to emerge within Marxism, and many Marxists started to display an intolerance and hostility toward opponents and “opportunists”—attitudes unacceptable in science, thereby transforming Marxism from an open system of thought into a closed one, into a creed.

Lenin, too, did not view his books, articles, and speeches as indisputable dogmas. He lived and worked amidst fierce political struggle and ideological debate, and his own views evolved over the course of that struggle and the revolutionary political practice that became his life’s work. Lenin never produced a single book or article that could be singled out as his “principal” work. Yes, of course, Leninism was a continuation and development of Marxism within the global context of the first two decades of the 20th century, but Lenin was not the only claimant to the legacy of Marx and Engels, even within Russia. At that time, both G. Plekhanov and L. Martov were also staking their own claims to the Russian version of Marxism. As both an ideological concept and a political movement, Leninism and Bolshevism occupied the far-left flank of global social democracy at that time. Within the Russian revolutionary movement, Lenin acted as a fierce radical, yet his goal was not to create a totalitarian doctrine or a totalitarian party. Despite his intolerance of “revisionism” and his insistence on strict party discipline, Lenin permitted theoretical debates and political controversy, within certain limits, among the Bolshevik leadership.

Even in the early 1920s, Leninism was not the rigid ideological monolith that the Stalin-era “Marxism-Leninism” later became—a system for which the *Short Course* was intended to serve as “holy scripture.”

This book was immediately upon publication officially designated an “encyclopedia of fundamental knowledge in the field of Marxism-Leninism.” Moreover, in unofficial conversations, often with a note of admiration, though sometimes with a touch of irony, the *Short Course* was referred to as the “Bible of Communism.” Indeed, for 15 years in the USSR, the book functioned as a Bible—that is, a text that every adherent of socialism and communism was required to know, and whose tenets could not be questioned without risk to life.

From the History of Marxism-Leninism

Lenin’s death placed all Bolsheviks, and all adherents of Leninism abroad, in an extremely difficult position. The success of the revolution in Russia had stirred great hopes everywhere and focused immense attention on the figure and views of the revolution’s leader. However, Lenin never attempted to set forth his doctrines in a systematized, concise form—like the *Manifesto*—or, conversely, to elaborate them into a new *Capital*. Moreover, neither Lenin nor Marx and Engels ever possessed a clear, definitive concept of socialism as a new socio-economic formation. Marx and Engels repeatedly stated that their primary task was to demonstrate the historical limitations of capitalism and the inevitability of its transformation into a more just society—socialism. Yet in the 19th century, socialism existed merely as an idea, as an image, rather than as a reality that could be studied in the same way as feudalism or capitalism. True, one could find a

hundred or even two hundred characteristics of the socio-political and economic order they termed “socialism” within the writings of the classical Marxist thinkers. These included the abolition of private property and the exploitation of man by man; the planning and centralization of social production; the equality of men and women; the elimination of the divide between town and country and between mental and manual labor; the end of state coercion; free labor; equitable distribution based on work; and so on and so forth. Yet all of this consisted largely of conjectures—even dreams—rather than rigorous truths grounded in experience and analysis.

Unlike some of their disciples and followers, who sought to depict the future socialist society in minute detail, Marx and Engels made no effort to elaborate their vision of socialism; indeed, even when discussing the dictatorship of the proletariat, they spoke with far less dogmatic certainty than was later attributed to them. According to the founders of Marxism, the principal distinction between scientific socialism and utopian socialism lay precisely in the refusal to sketch out blueprints for a future society. Engels frequently stated that, for both himself and Marx, socialism was primarily a “socialist critique of the capitalist mode of production.” While there were, of course, isolated hypotheses, Marx was entirely justified in asserting that he had never “constructed a socialist system.”¹

Lenin, too, while sharing the socialist ideas of Marx and Engels, was fully aware of their abstract nature. Until early 1917, Lenin, like other Social Democrats in Russia, was convinced that introducing socialism in Russia “would be the height of absurdity” and that it should merely be “preached,” since socialism was “unfeasible in Russia directly, immediately, and without

¹ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Sochineniia* (Russian edition), vol. 19, p. 172.

transitional measures.”² Even in March 1918 (n.s.), with the Bolsheviks already at the helm of the Soviet state, Lenin stated at the 7th Extraordinary Party Congress:

We cannot characterize socialism; we do not know—and cannot say—what socialism will look like when it attains its finished forms, because the material for characterizing socialism does not yet exist. The bricks from which socialism will be built have not yet been made.³

Following Marx, Lenin cited only a few of the most general goals and features of socialism: social welfare; labor productivity higher than under capitalism; and the predominance of large-scale, scientifically organized production requiring state planning and extreme centralization. Commodity-money relations, wage labor, exploitation, and the market were deemed incompatible with socialism.

“As long as exchange remains,” Lenin wrote, “it is ridiculous to speak of socialism.”⁴ In Britain, socialism might, perhaps, become a reality through peaceful evolution but in Russia and contemporary Europe the victory of socialism could come only through revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The realities of 1918–1920 proved far more difficult and dramatic than had been imagined by the Bolsheviks, with their rather limited repertoire of ideas and plans. Having won the Civil War, they faced an all-encompassing political, social, and economic crisis, the progression of which was halted only through the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Yet Lenin’s proposals to introduce this new economic policy “seriously and for a long time” [*vser'ëz i nadolgo*] marked merely the beginning of his explorations into the theory and practice of socialism. Throughout 1921 and 1922, Lenin was beset by doubts

² V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (5th Russian edition), vol. 31, p. 56.

³ V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 36, pp. 48, 65–6.

⁴ V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 17, p. 127.

and anxieties and he died in January 1924, leaving his successors and followers with far more questions than answers.

After the death of Lenin, theoretical work in the fields of Marxism and scientific socialism did not cease. It was, however, in the context of our country intertwined with fierce political rivalry, with a struggle for power. At that time, the primary work proceeded along three lines. It was necessary to systematize Lenin's views, setting forth the "foundations of Leninism" in a clear and concise manner. It was also necessary to devise formulas and approaches that could fuse Marxism and Leninism into a single theoretical concept. Yet the most difficult challenge lay in addressing issues arising from real-life circumstances—issues that in the past had never confronted Marx and Engels, nor Lenin. While the authority of these leaders was immense, the question remained: who could now take their place and lead the Party and the country onward toward the radiant heights of socialism?

To many, it seemed that Trotsky might become the Party's new leader. In 1924, he wrote several articles on Lenin and Leninism and was the first Politburo member to begin publishing his own collected works. However, Trotsky's ambition alarmed other Party leaders; he resorted too frequently to administrative methods, even violence, while his arrogance and haughtiness alienated many and threatened to split the Party. Above all, Trotsky had only become a Bolshevik in 1917, and he now sought to outdo everyone else in radicalism. Significant ambitions were also harbored by G. Zinoviev; he wrote and published a book titled *Leninism*⁵ as well as a programmatic article, "The Philosophy of the Epoch." L. Kamenev, who presided over meetings of both the Council of People's Commissars and the Politburo during 1923–1924, also published a pamphlet titled *Lenin and the Party*. N. Bukharin was

⁵ G. Zinoviev, *Leninizm: Vvedenie v izuchenie leninizma*. Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1925. English edition: *Leninism: An Introduction to the Study of Leninism*. Tim Davenport, ed. Corvallis, OR: 1000 Flowers Publishing, 2026. Digital publication, free download via Archive.org and Marxists Internet Archive. —T.D.

particularly active, producing works such as *Lenin as a Marxist* and *The Path to Socialism and the Worker-Peasant Alliance*.

Stalin conducted himself more modestly than the others and supported N. Bukharin's theoretical claims. Nevertheless, Stalin also delivered a series of lectures in 1924 at Sverdlov University in Moscow, which were subsequently published by *Pravda* under the general title *The Foundations of Leninism*. Supplementing this work with several articles and polemical essays, Stalin released a collection under the title *Problems of Leninism*. From the late 1920s onwards, this book, updated annually with new material,⁶ became the primary textbook for university-level courses on the "Foundations of Leninism." However, Stalin was at that time neither a monopolist in the realm of Marxism and Leninism nor a dictator. For instance, in Leningrad, party study circles preferred to conduct classes using G. Safarov's book *The Foundations of Leninism*, which saw three editions published in the city in 1924 alone.

The years 1925–1929 were in our country's history a time not only of rapid economic growth driven by NEP but also of swift development across nearly all spheres of education, science, and culture. During these years, hundreds of books were published in the USSR on the history of socialism and communism, the Civil War, national issues, the history of revolutions, and the history of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) [VKP(b)]. A vast body of polemical literature concerning Marxism, Leninism, and the history of the Party were generated by the inner-Party struggle. Particularly prolific in this field was Emelian Yaroslavsky—a professional party functionary, propagandist, member of the editorial boards of *Pravda* and *Bolshevik*, head of the All-Union Society of Former Political Exiles and Prisoners, and a member of the directorate of the Lenin Institute. As early as 1926–1929, a

⁶ While there were additions made frequently for early versions of the book, after the appearance of the 11th edition in 1939, content of this basic volume of Stalin's selected works remained fixed until it was taken out of print in 1954. —T.D.

four-volume history of the VKP(b) was published under Yaroslavsky's editorship. In 1930, Yaroslavsky himself wrote and published *A Short History of the VKP(b)*. Yaroslavsky had known Stalin from the time of the Tammerfors Conference and the Fifth Congress of the RSDLP in London, but he was not part of the top party leadership. He operated primarily as a propagandist, publicist, and historian, and was known as the editor of the journals *Bezbozhnik* [The Godless] and *Istoriik-Marksist* [Marxist Historian].

Stalin's own works did not appear at that time to be particularly outstanding. There was as yet no cult of Stalin in either the country or the Party. The situation began to change only after the defeat of various "Left" and "Right" opposition groups, when decisive power in both the country and the Party fell into Stalin's hands. At the very end of the 1920s and in the early 1930s, alongside the policies of forced collectivization, the liquidation of the kulaks, and industrialization, the first waves of mass repression were launched against "bourgeois" specialists, against "nationalists" and "Trotskyists." All these political campaigns and repressions led to a marked hardening of the regime within the country and the party, as well as to a regression in all the humanities, including every branch of historical scholarship.

A New Classic of Marxism–Leninism

In issue No. 6 of 1931 of the journal *Proletarian Revolution* was published a letter from Stalin titled "On Certain Questions of the History of Bolshevism"—a document that was extremely crude and even threatening in tone, and far from indisputable in content. The main thrust of the attack was directed against "Trotskyist contraband" within the history of the VKP(b). However, Emelian Yaroslavsky also came under fire; according to Stalin, he had failed to avoid "a number of errors of a fundamental and historical

nature.” Stalin’s letter triggered a new wave of repressions among Marxist historians, many of whom were dismissed from their posts and expelled from the Party. Some were banished from Moscow to the provinces. Throughout 1931 and 1932, Stalin took personal control of the situation and the debates surrounding Marxist philosophy, political economy, and eventually almost all the humanities. Even in the 1920s, Soviet historical scholarship had hardly been a model of objectivity or creative freedom; however, the early 1930s saw the onset of a process, strictly orchestrated from above, of blatant falsification and the excessive glorification of Stalin, rapidly evolving into a cult of personality. History was becoming an adjunct of ideology, while that ideology, now officially termed “Marxism-Leninism,” was beginning to transform into a secular form of religious consciousness centered on the worship of the Leader. It was during these years that the formula “the teachings of Marx–Engels–Lenin–Stalin” emerged, alongside the formula “Stalin is Lenin today.” Stalin was proclaimed a new classic figure of Marxism-Leninism, foremost in influence and authority, for he stood at the helm of a powerful state and party apparatus and directed the operations of a vast, ruthless system of punitive agencies.

Stalin’s interventions in the work of philosophers, historians, and economists during the early and mid-1930s generally did not take the form of public statements in the press or at congresses and conferences of the VKP(b). He preferred indirect methods of influence—through the Central Committee apparatus, through his secretaries and aides, by means of letters and telephone calls. At times, he would summon the directors or party heads of various research institutes, as well as newspaper and journal editors, for private conversations or Politburo meetings. Prominent specialists on the history of the Party were among those who visited J.V. Stalin’s Kremlin office. For instance, N.N. Popov, author of the then-popular *Outline History of the VKP(b)*, was summoned to Stalin’s office four times in 1932. V.G. Knorin, who was not only

an author of books and pamphlets on Party history but also a senior Central Committee official, was invited by Stalin to meet with him eight times between 1932 and 1935. E.M. Yaroslavsky was also received by Stalin eight times during 1932–1933—although in subsequent years, Stalin would only occasionally reply to Yaroslavsky’s letters and refused to grant him an audience. A.S. Bubnov visited Stalin more frequently than anyone else, though he was not merely an author of books on Party history but also the People’s Commissar for Education of the RSFSR.⁷

In the Soviet Union during the mid-1930s, an extensive system of Party education and schools for Party cadres remained in operation; courses on the “Fundamentals of Leninism” and the “History of the VKP(b)” were taught in many higher education institutions. Consequently, a significant number of books and pamphlets on the history of the VKP(b) were published at the time. The most popular work was E. Yaroslavsky’s two-volume history of the VKP(b), the first edition of which appeared in 1933, followed by a second edition in 1935. At the very end of 1936, Politizdat began preparing a third edition of this textbook. However, in February 1937, the publishing house released only volume 1 of Yaroslavsky’s text. The political climate and official directives had changed.

In the early 1930s, the idea emerged to compile an official textbook on the history of the Party that would require approval by the Central Committee of the VKP(b). On January 7, 1932, the Politburo of the Central Committee adopted a resolution “On the Compilation of a ‘History of the VKP(b).’” The editorial board included “Comrades Stalin, Kaganovich, and Postyshev, as well as Comrades Molotov, Piatnitsky, Stetsky, and Aloratsky.” The compilers designated for the textbook were V.G. Knorin, N.N. Popov, E. Yaroslavsky, and V.A. Bystrinsky, along with the People’s Commissars of Education for Russia and Ukraine, A.S.

⁷ “Visitors to the Kremlin Office of I.V. Stalin: Alphabetical index,” *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 1998, No. 4. (in Russian)

Bubnov and N.A. Skrypnik. Named secretary of the publication was I.P. Tovstukha.⁸

Work began but proceeded very slowly. Moreover, the plan called for a large, multi-volume textbook. Correspondence regarding the textbook, including exchanges with Stalin, was extensive, yet by the end of 1934 not even the outlines of the new work had been defined, even though several other prominent figures of the time had been added to the list of the book's compilers, including M.D. Orakhelashvili.

After the assassination of S.M. Kirov, the situation within the country and the Party began to shift so rapidly that any serious work on creating a multi-volume textbook on the history of the VKP(b) became impossible. On the other hand, the task became easier for various types of falsifiers and apologists. In 1935, a book rife with deliberate falsifications by Lavrenty Beria on the history of the Social Democratic organizations of Transcaucasia was published. In 1936, the first political biography of Stalin written in a spirit of fulsome praise saw the light of day. Its author was the French communist writer Henri Barbusse.

In 1935–1936, thousands of former members of various opposition groups were arrested in the Soviet Union, including dozens of figures known nationwide. A series of closed and “public” trials took place, such as the cases of the “Workers’ Opposition,” the “Kremlin Case,” the “Zinoviev-Kamenev Case,” and others. Censorship of the entire press, and political literature in particular, was tightened, and the removal from libraries and destruction of millions of books began. The list of individuals whose mention in a positive context was now impermissible grew steadily: G. Zinoviev, L. Kamenev, G. Evdokimov, I. Smirnov, G. Piatakov, K. Radek, A. Enukidze, G. Sokolnikov, N. Bukharin, A. Rykov, M. Tomskey, Kh. Rakovsky, D. Riazanov, and N. Krestinsky.

⁸ *Voprosy istorii*, 2002, no. 11, p. 4.

Unlawful repressions inflicted upon former opposition members dealt a severe blow to the cadres of the Party and the state. Yet all of this proved to be merely a prologue. From the beginning of 1937 and continuing for two years, the wave of repression mounted ceaselessly, assuming an increasingly massive and sinister character. Making no distinction between members of various opposition factions and their former opponents, and including not only Lenin's closest associates but also individuals within Stalin's own inner circle, the organs of the NKVD, directed and overseen personally by Stalin, embarked on the organized and systematic extermination of the leading cadres of Party and state. A vast number of senior officials across all Party, Soviet, and economic bodies, including those in the Union and autonomous republics, were physically eliminated. The ranks of the Komsomol, trade unions, judicial and prosecutorial bodies, and even the NKVD itself were decimated. Tens of thousands of Red Army commanders and commissars were destroyed, including the most renowned military leaders of the Civil War era: M. Tukhachevsky, I. Yakir, I. Uborevich, A. Kork, Ya. Gamarnik, A. Yegorov, and V. Bliukher. Thousands upon thousands of prominent cultural figures, writers, scientists, engineers, inventors, "Red professors," "Red directors," and industrial organizers perished. Many of the compilers and editors of the aforementioned multi-volume history textbook of the VKP(b)—Postyshev, Pyatnitsky, Stetsky, Knorin, Popov, Bubnov, and Orakhelashvili—were also physically eliminated. Tovstukha had died in 1935, while N. Skrypnik committed suicide.

Who was to write the new history textbook of the VKP(b) now? And about what, or about whom, could one write in such a textbook? Fear reigned in the country, the horror of terror and chaos. Without a doubt there was only one author—the new paragon of Marxism-Leninism—Stalin himself.

The *Short Course*: How the Work Proceeded

The Soviet Union was an ideological state. The legitimacy of power in our country was determined neither by democratic procedures nor by the principles of a hereditary monarchical system. The head of the Soviet state was required to remain faithful to certain ideological tenets—tenets that could not be arbitrarily altered without regard for the concepts and values inherent in communist ideology. The Leader of state and Party was expected to serve as their chief ideologue, but he could not simply abandon ideology or break with the continuity of the doctrine's foundations. Consequently, it was impossible to halt the teaching of Marxism-Leninism, Marxist philosophy, and the history of the VKP(b), and the history of the USSR, or to shut down the Party and Komsomol schools, study circles, and courses through which the majority of the population passed. Ideological training also constituted a vital component of both secondary and higher education. A new textbook on the history of the VKP(b) was therefore urgently needed; its creation could not be delayed any longer. By the mid-1930s, hundreds of thousands of individuals lacking any serious ideological grounding had risen to positions of leadership in the country, the Party, the economy, and the army. Among them were many careerists and opportunists. Yet there were even more recent Stakhanovites, factory workers, and rank-and-file engineers and office employees—people who had taken no part in the Revolution or the Civil War, who possessed no significant record of service, and who also lacked knowledge of Party history and communist ideology.

On May 1, 1937, issue No. 9 of the journal *Bolshevik* published a lengthy letter by I. Stalin titled “On the Textbook on the History of the VKP(b): A Letter to the Compilers of the Textbook on the History of the VKP(b).” On May 6, 1937, this same letter, with some amendments, was published in *Pravda*. Between May 15 and

May 20, 1937, Partizdat, publishing house of the Central Committee of the VKP(b), published Stalin's letter and a commentary on it by V. Knorin as a small pamphlet. In this letter, Stalin declared all previous textbooks on the history of the VKP(b) to be unsatisfactory. These textbooks presented the history of the Party in isolation from the history of the country; they limited themselves to a simple description of events and the struggles between various currents, failing to provide the necessary Marxist explanation. They suffered from flawed structure and incorrect periodization of events. Consequently, these textbooks were reduced to "a facile and unintelligible account of past events." Stalin went on to offer a series of recommendations for compiling a new textbook on the history of the Party. The principal recommendation was to present the history of the Bolsheviks' struggle against various anti-Bolshevik currents and factions as a principled fight for Leninism; otherwise, the Bolshevik Party would have degenerated just as the social democratic parties of the Second International had done.

"Without such explanations," Stalin noted, "the struggle of factions and currents in the history of the Party would appear as an incomprehensible squabble, and the Bolsheviks—as incorrigible and restless brawlers and troublemakers."⁹ Stalin then proposed his own scheme for the periodization of the Party's history, one that "could serve as a basis."

Stalin's schema differed significantly from the periodization schemes for the Party's history that had been adopted previously. E. Yaroslavsky's textbook contained 26 chapters. In the *Short History of the VKP(b)* produced by the "Brigade of the Institute of Party History" under the editorship of V. Knorin, the history of the party was divided into 16 periods. Stalin proposed in his schema only 12 chapters.

⁹ *K izucheniiu istorii VKP(b)*. Moscow: Partizdat, 1937; p. 4. /// The "Letter to the Compilers of the Textbook on the History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)" appears in Russian in so-called "Volume 14" of the *Stalin Works* edited by Robert H. McNeal, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1967; pp. 248–52. —*T.D.*

Both Yaroslavsky and Knorin proceeded from the assumption that the Bolsheviks, not merely as a political faction but as a party, originated in 1903—that is, with the Second Congress of the RSDLP. Lenin, too, had previously spoken in these terms. Chapter 10 of Yaroslavsky's book (and, correspondingly, Chapter 7 of Knorin's) covered events from 1911 to 1914. These authors dated the era of reaction and "Stolypinism" to the period between 1907 and 1910, while designating the years 1911–1914 as a "new revolutionary upsurge." Stalin proposed the following title for Chapter 4 of the new textbook: "Mensheviks and Bolsheviks during the Period of Stolypin Reaction and the Emergence of the Bolsheviks as an Independent Social Democratic Workers' Party (1908–1912)."

Of the Prague Conference of the RSDLP, held in January 1912, Yaroslavsky and Knorin wrote little, mentioning it almost in passing. But Stalin singled out this conference, insisting, both then and later, that it held the formal status of a party congress and that the RSDLP(b) as a party traced its origins specifically to the Prague Conference. It is well known that it was only at the Prague Conference that Stalin was elected (in absentia) to the Party Central Committee and joined its narrower body, the Russian Bureau of the Central Committee.

Yaroslavsky had covered the events of World War I and the February Revolution in two separate chapters. Stalin combined all of this into a single chapter, and it was only in the final section of that chapter that one could read about the February Revolution, the fall of Tsarism, and the formation of the Soviets. Yaroslavsky had written about the events and conferences of April 1917 in the chapter on the February Revolution. Stalin proposed including the analysis of the events and debates of April 1917 in the chapter on the preparation and execution of the October Revolution. As is known, in February and early March 1917, Stalin was still in Siberia and took no part in the events unfolding in Petrograd during those weeks. There were many such differences and

innovations, highly significant for specialists in the history of the VKP(b). The history of the party was being brought into greater alignment not only with the actual history of the country but also with the facts of Stalin's personal biography.

Stalin's proposals regarding the new periodization and the new outline of the textbook were immediately approved by the Politburo, and work resumed. Of the original group of actual authors, only Yaroslavsky and Knorin remained at liberty. Yet Knorin, too, was soon arrested. Even earlier, Pyotr Nikolayevich Pospelov, a 38-year-old Party functionary holding the modest post of head of the press group for the Party Control Commission of the Central Committee of the VKP(b), had been included among the textbook's authors. He was a cautious bureaucratic official with no scholarly publications or even academic ambitions to his name. Yet it was Pospelov, whom Stalin had never even met before, who ultimately became the key figure responsible for preparing the new history textbook of the Party.

A Politburo decision allotted four months for the entire project; in other words, the text had to be ready by the end of October 1937. This timeline was disrupted not only by the arrests of Knorin and Popov but also by the detention of several lesser-known participants in the project. Although Stalin met almost daily with People's Commissar for Internal Affairs N.I. Yezhov in 1937, he found no time to meet with Pospelov or Yaroslavsky. He entrusted the supervision and direction of the entire textbook project to Politburo member A.A. Zhdanov. Yet even Zhdanov, for all his high-ranking posts and authority, dared not offer the kind of advice or resolve the sort of issues that, at the time, only one man in the country and the Party—Stalin himself—could decide.

As can be gathered from documents published in the journal *Voprosy istorii* in 2002–2003,¹⁰ the first typewritten draft of the textbook on the history of the VKP(b) was not ready until late

¹⁰ "I.V. Stalin v rabote nad *Kratkim kursom istorii VKP(b)*," *Voprosy istorii*, 2002, No. 11, p. 7.

February 1938. Stalin found the work unsatisfactory. P. Pospelov was still too inexperienced and timid and he consequently avoided making any theoretical generalizations whatsoever, especially in instances where it was impossible to cite a direct quote from Lenin or Stalin. E. Yaroslavsky, also acting out of constant fear, had included in the text a detailed account of Stalin's pre-revolutionary biography, as well as the biographies of Molotov and certain other Politburo members. Stalin struck all of this out. His first detailed consultation with Pospelov, which was also attended by Molotov and Zhdanov, took place in the Kremlin only on March 4, 1938, and continued the following day. Yaroslavsky was not invited to this meeting. Stalin explained the numerous deletions, corrections, and insertions he made to the textbook draft; he answered questions and offered advice. Many issues were resolved orally during this process and were not recorded in any documents.

The second typewritten draft of the textbook was prepared at the end of July or in very early August 1938. The authors had incorporated all the comments and advice Stalin offered in March, as well as the corrections and remarks he had made regarding specific chapters of the first draft during May and June of 1938. These comments had been conveyed to the authors through the Central Committee apparatus. This new draft also did not fully satisfy Stalin. In August 1938, Stalin devoted fourteen days almost entirely to working on a new version of the *Short Course*. During this time, he worked alone in his Kremlin office and received no visitors. Stalin was in a hurry; as soon as he finished editing and revising a chapter, he would immediately send it to members of the Politburo, as well as to Pospelov and Yaroslavsky—dispatching one chapter each day.

He received responses almost daily as well—from August 16 to September 9. These responses were generally brief: “I have no comments” (Khrushchev), “An excellent piece of work” (Voroshilov), “Remarkably good” (Kalinin), “I agree” (Molotov), “Read it” (Mikoyan), “Very good, I don’t know how it could be

improved” (Kalinin), “Read it with great pleasure” (Khrushchev), “I have no corrections” (Yezhov), “No corrections” (Zhdanov), “Read it all with great satisfaction” (Andreev), “Superb” (Voroshilov), “Enthusiastically in favor” (Molotov), and so on. In some letters to Stalin, Politburo members ventured to suggest minor editorial changes. Their critical remarks focused primarily on the fact that the book did not sufficiently highlight Stalin’s outstanding role in the victories and achievements of the VKP(b).

The publication of the first chapter of the *Short Course* was scheduled for September 9, 1938. On September 8 at 7 p.m., all the project participants—Stalin, Molotov, Zhdanov, Yaroslavsky, and Pospelov—gathered in Stalin’s office. L.Ya. Rovinsky, a member of the *Pravda* editorial board, was also summoned to the Kremlin. The final decision was reached around 11 p.m. Over the next eleven consecutive days, these same individuals met late in the evening and at night to make decisions regarding each successive installment for publication. Stalin made some corrections not to the textbook proofs, but to the *Pravda* page proofs.¹¹

The *Short Course* was published in book form in October 1938 with a print run of 6 million copies. The entire print run sold out across the country within three or four weeks, and the Politburo twice issued resolutions to print additional editions of 2 million copies each. By Politburo decision, the *Short Course* was translated and published in the USSR in the languages of all the union republics and many autonomous republics. As early as September 27, 1938, a directive was adopted regarding the translation and publication of the book in French, English, German, Polish, Czech, Swedish, Finnish, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Malay, “Hindu,” Bulgarian, and “Yugoslav.” Everyone was in a great hurry. D.Z. Manuilsky, Secretary of the Comintern and a member of the Central Committee of the VKP(b), was instructed to assemble teams of translators and editorial

¹¹ *Voprosy istorii*, 2002, No. 11, p. 8.

commissions within three days. The deadline for translations into “all languages” was set for November 15, 1938—a period of just a month and a half. Responsibility for selecting and translating the quotations from the works of the classics of Marxism-Leninism cited in the *History of the VKP(b)* was assigned not to the Comintern, but to the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute. Soon, Stalin’s name was also added to the institute’s title.

A Politburo decision even set the price for a single copy of the book in Russian—3 rubles, inexpensive by standards of the day. Stalin kept urging everyone on. “We are already a full year behind schedule with this project,” he told Politburo members. Not only the reading but also the study of the *Short Course* began as early as September 1938 in all Party organizations of the country and in Komsomol study circles.

Stalin—Principal Author of the *Short Course*

Both Politburo members and virtually all officials in the ideological departments of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) and regional Party committees knew that Stalin had personally worked on the text of the history of the Party, and that he had edited and written many pages of this *Short Course*. Stalin was responsible not only for the book’s overall outline but also for the headings of all its chapters and the sections within them. He wrote all the sections and pages dealing with theory. At that time, only Stalin could provide official assessments and characterizations of prominent figures in the history of the Party and of Russia and the Soviet Union. Only Stalin could officially define the significance of all major historical events—from the Russo-Japanese War and the World War to collectivization, industrialization, and the adoption of the new Constitution. Only Stalin could offer “correct” judgments regarding the nature of all Russian political parties, as

well as all intra-Party currents, opposition movements, factions, and groups.

As early as November 28, 1938, Fyodor Samoylov, director of the State Museum of the Revolution, an Old Bolshevik, and a former deputy of the Fourth State Duma whom Stalin knew from their time in exile in the Turukhansk region, wrote a letter to A.N. Poskrebyshev, the head of Stalin's secretariat:

To the Central Committee of the VKP(b), Comrade Poskrebyshev.

In connection with the need to display the *Short Course on the History of the VKP(b)* at the USSR Museum of the Revolution, might it be possible to ask Comrade Stalin for permission to obtain a few pages of the *Short Course* that were written or edited by him, or galley proofs corrected in Comrade Stalin's own hand? If the originals of these materials cannot be obtained, could the Museum be provided with photocopies instead? Displaying these materials would be of great value and interest to the Museum's visitors.

Poskrebyshev showed this letter to Stalin a few days later, and Stalin wrote his reply directly on the Museum of the Revolution's letterhead:

To Comrade Samoilov.

I did not think that in your old age you would concern yourself with such trifles. If the book has already been published in millions of copies, why do you need the manuscripts? To put your mind at ease, I have burned all the manuscripts.

Regards,
6 Dec. 1938
I. Stalin.

This letter, bearing Stalin's handwritten note, was retrieved from the archives as early as late 1955 during preparations for the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Based on this document, N.S. Khrushchev accused Stalin of something bordering on plagiarism: the *Short Course*, as

Khrushchev testified, was written by a team of authors, yet in the *Short Biography of Stalin* published in 1948, Stalin himself inserted a phrase stating that “the book *History of the VKP(b): Short Course* was written by Comrade Stalin and approved by a commission of the VKP(b) Central Committee.”

“As you can see,” N.S. Khrushchev exclaimed in his secret report at a closed session of the congress, “a work created by a collective was transformed into a book written by Stalin!”¹²

In this instance, N.S. Khrushchev was mistaken. As is well known, not all manuscripts burn. Portions of the typewritten drafts of the *Short Course* bearing various corrections and insertions made by Stalin himself have survived, and these materials were published in 2002–2003 by the journal *Voprosy Istorii*. The journal published materials and documents that had been transferred to the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI). While some of these documents were already known, many were published for the first time, although the publishers themselves noted that the collection was incomplete, with significant gaps in both subject matter and the timeline of the work. Nevertheless, these documents make it possible to determine much more precisely Stalin’s role in the creation of the *Short Course*, the chronology and objectives of his work on the text, and the significance of the changes he introduced to the book’s draft.¹³

It becomes evident that Stalin needed P. Pospelov and Yaroslavsky not as co-authors, but rather as a form of “cover” for actual authorship. This arrangement made it easier for him to retain extensive quotations and excessive praise of himself within the textbook. Operating under the guise of the “Commission of the Central Committee of the VKP(b),” Stalin could more easily introduce new assessments of specific party figures and historical events that diverged from previously established views. The new

¹² *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 1989, No. 3, p. 158.

¹³ *Voprosy istorii*, 2002, No. 11, p. 3.

history textbook contained numerous outright falsifications and patently false assertions. Yet, in most instances, historical distortion was achieved through the use of so-called “figures of omission.” Individuals who had fallen out of favor, or even events crucial to understanding history, were simply excised from the textbook’s text.

The changes made to the textbook’s title itself are intriguing. The initial version of the title read:

History of the VKP(b): Short Course.

Edited by E. Yaroslavsky and P. Pospelov.

Approved by the Commission of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) for Party and Komsomol schools, courses, and study circles.

Stalin initially wrote “popular course” and placed A.A. Zhdanov first on the list of editors. Later, he crossed out all the names and the word “popular,” writing instead: “Edited by the Commission of the Central Committee of the VKP(b). Approved by the Central Committee of the VKP(b) for Party and Komsomol schools, courses, and study circles.”¹⁴ In the final version of the title, the mention of courses and study circles disappeared as well.

Only recently have we been able to examine a draft of a lengthy preface to the *Short Course* that had never been published before.¹⁵ Stalin wrote it personally—with the exception of a few paragraphs. It is evident that Stalin worked seriously on this text. The typescript bears annotations by both Stalin and B.A. Dvinsky, one of the General Secretary’s assistants from his office—known since 1934 as the Special Sector of the Central Committee. The draft preface comprised 25 typewritten pages divided into four sections: 1. The historical role and significance of the VKP(b); 2. The doctrine of Marxism-Leninism—the Party’s true compass; 3.

¹⁴ *Voprosy istorii*, 2002, No. 11, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Voprosy istorii*, 2002, No. 11, pp. 9–18.

Why did our country become the birthplace of Leninism?; 4. The law of development of the proletarian party.

Ultimately, Stalin removed this text from the proofs and did not circulate it to the members of the Politburo. There is no indication that E. Yaroslavsky and P. Pospelov saw the text. It was an attempt to preface the *Short Course* with an even more concise theoretical distillation of the history of the VKP(b). Stalin himself undoubtedly deemed the attempt unsuccessful.

The published materials contain no comments or corrections by Stalin regarding Chapters 1 and 2 of the *Short Course*, even though those very chapters were replete with the kind of theoretical constructs and assessments that only Stalin himself could have formulated at the time. His style and language were instantly recognizable, even to us—young instructors of history and philosophy. We could spot specific phrases or paragraphs written or dictated by Stalin himself, even in diplomatic notes or other official documents and addresses. Such insertions were beyond editing. Stalin almost invariably broke the material down into subsections: “firstly,” “secondly,” “thirdly.” Whenever we encountered “three signs,” “four features,” “five reasons,” “six conditions,” “eight tasks,” or “ten shortcomings” in a complex text, we knew for certain that Stalin himself had written or spoken those words. His assertions were concise, clear, and at times even overly simplistic. He would even allow himself a deliberate bluntness in his expressions and judgments.

Across all his works, Stalin favored a catechism-like style—a form of instruction containing both questions and answers, with both presented in extremely accessible language. He had adopted this style back in the seminary. Whenever we came across turns of phrase like “Is this definition correct? I believe it is. It is correct, firstly, because...” we knew immediately that the text had been written by Stalin. Sometimes he simply hammered certain points into our heads: “Was Lenin right to act that way? I think Lenin was absolutely right.” Yet it was precisely in the first and second

chapters of the *Short Course* that one could find all those favorite turns of phrase characteristic of Stalin. It was in a catechism-like style that the text discussed the errors of the Narodniks, the contributions of G. Plekhanov, as well as Plekhanov's own errors, the tasks and goals of the early workers' organizations, Lenin's struggle against Narodism and Legal Marxism, the Leninist plan for building a Marxist party, and the ideological foundations of such a party. Stalin outlines the content and theoretical tenets developed in Lenin's book *What Is to Be Done?* in six points, while discussing the book's historical significance in four points. The results and significance of the Second Congress of the RSDLP are presented in five points, and this material had to be memorized in precisely that order. Stalin sets out the organizational foundations of the Bolshevik Party in four strictly distinct points. Both the first and second chapters concluded with a "Brief Conclusions" section, and these conclusions were also presented as a numbered list.

Based on everything published to date, we can conclude with complete certainty that work on the *Short Course* proceeded with Stalin's participation and under his leadership, unfolding in stages, wave after wave.

Upon receiving the initial typewritten draft, Stalin would carefully edit it, replacing significant portions of the text with his own writing and crossing out entire pages. He would then receive the revised text and edit it a second time, and so on. The journal *Voprosy Istorii* documents the final stage of this process, showing Stalin editing the ultimate draft layout of the *Short Course*. According to those who have published these materials, the earliest draft layouts may still be located within the unprocessed section of the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation (APRF). However, it is entirely possible that Stalin actually ordered them to be burned.

Although the initial chapters of the *Short Course* have not survived, the reviews of them written to Stalin on the very same

day—August 17, 1938—by both Yaroslavsky and Pospelov have been preserved.

“Dear Comrade Stalin!” wrote Yaroslavsky:

I have read the first two chapters of the *History of the VKP(b)* sent to me for review and comment. I have no corrections to make to these chapters. I am extremely happy that the editing of the textbook is nearing completion and that, thanks to your work, the textbook is acquiring such immense significance for the Bolshevik education of the masses. However, I do have one substantial observation. In these two chapters, even the mention of your name and details regarding your work have been excised from the text. This is a manifestation of your supreme modesty—a quality that adorns a Bolshevik. Yet you belong to history, and your role in building the Party must be fully reflected... For me personally, the work you have accomplished also serves as a form of study—a school—and will assist me in the work on the major textbook on the history of the Party that the Central Committee has commissioned Comrade Pospelov and me to compile.

P. Pospelov wrote in even more definite and enthusiastic terms:

Central Committee of the VKP(b).
To Comrade Stalin.

I have read and re-read the first two chapters of the *History of the VKP(b)* several times. First and foremost, one is overcome by a sense of great joy: thanks to the tremendous work you have accomplished, the Party now possesses a history truly worthy of it—one in which all issues are raised to a lofty scientific and theoretical plane while being presented with crystal clarity, without a single superfluous word... Reading and re-reading the first two chapters, one realizes just how imperfect—both in content and form—was the draft material we had originally submitted. One is particularly struck by the weak treatment of the theoretical aspects of the Party’s history in the old material—aspects that have now, following your radical revision, been brought to the forefront. Yet there is one point with which, it seems to me, one cannot agree. In the course of the radical revision, everything concerning the history of the Bolshevik organizations in Transcaucasia was cut down. And yet, the activities of the Transcaucasian Bolshevik organizations under Comrade Stalin’s leadership were of immense significance for the Party as a whole.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Voprosy istorii*, 2003, No. 3, p. 4.

It is perfectly obvious that such letters could only have been written by “junior” authors and editors to their chief author and Supreme Editor. Stalin, however, chose not to include any material on the work of the Bolsheviks in Transcaucasia in the text of the first few chapters. Doing so would have violated one of the *Short Course*’s guiding principles: to write as little as possible about the work of local Party organizations. Otherwise, it would have been necessary to write about the Urals, the Donbas, Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, and St. Petersburg—places where Bolshevik organizations were larger and more active than those in Baku and Batum.

In the final draft of the *Short Course*, several text fragments were inserted by Stalin’s own hand into Chapter III. The account of facts regarding the Russo-Japanese War and the rise of the revolutionary movement in Russia in 1904–1905 was drafted by E. Yaroslavsky, P. Pospelov, and others; all of this material could also be found in earlier textbooks on the history of the VKP(b). However, the discussion and assessment of the tactical disagreements between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, the analysis and evaluation of Lenin’s book *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, and the examination of the reasons for the defeat of the first Russian revolution—all of this was undoubtedly penned by Stalin. It is only in the third chapter of the *Short Course* that the figure of Stalin himself appears. Here, the text speaks of the “immense revolutionary work Comrade Stalin carried out in Transcaucasia” and of the first personal meeting between Lenin and Stalin at the Bolshevik conference in Tammerfors, Finland.

Chapter IV was devoted to the situation in Russia and the activities of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks during the years of the Stolypin reaction. Stalin made numerous amendments to the text of this chapter and almost completely rewrote the section concerning

the results and significance of the 6th (Prague) Conference of the RSDLP,¹⁷ which had been organized and conducted by the Bolsheviks. However, the greatest surprise for everyone involved in preparing the *Short Course* was the new text proposed by Stalin for section 2 of the fourth chapter; bearing the modest title “On Dialectical and Historical Materialism,” it was written entirely by Stalin himself. There is a vast body of literature concerning this work by Stalin, which was soon published as a separate pamphlet. There is no point in repeating here either the praise heaped upon this “brilliant work” or the harsh criticism leveled at this popular, yet overly simplistic and even vulgarizing, exposition of the fundamentals of Marxist philosophy, in which Stalin outlined four key features of the dialectical method and three key features of philosophical materialism. At the same time, we learned of three characteristics of production as the primary force determining the nature of the social order and the evolution of society from one system to another. Below, I cite only the reactions of the first readers of Chapter IV, who received the text on August 26—for one day only.

Mikhail Kalinin wrote to Stalin:

It seems to me impossible to expound dialectical materialism more simply, clearly, or precisely. One could say that millions of people have gained the opportunity to grasp the ideology of communism in an almost tangible way.

Molotov was equally brief:

Among all the remarkable chapters, this one is particularly instructive. It would be good to mention that the Mensheviks did not wage a struggle for Marxist theory against anti-Marxists, whereas Plekhanov did—albeit half-heartedly... *V. Molotov*.

¹⁷ The Prague Conference of the RSDLP was held from January 18–30 (n.s.), 1912. It was the last party conclave held until 1917. —*T.D.*

P. Pospelov was the first to reply to Stalin. He wrote:

Dear Comrade STALIN!

Chapter Four is even more striking than the preceding ones for the richness of its theoretical content. The exposition of the theoretical foundations of the Marxist party, provided in the section “On Dialectical and Historical Materialism” and elsewhere in the chapter, will help party cadres seriously address the elimination of theoretical weakness. But the significance of this chapter is far broader: undoubtedly, it will play a crucial role in overcoming all manner of capitalist vestiges in the minds of the people in our country...

The most emotional letter came from E. Yaroslavsky:

Dear Comrade STALIN!

I received the chapter of the *History of the VKP(b)* yesterday, on my day off. I must tell you that I could not tear myself away from reading this chapter: it is so rich in fresh content—new to anyone studying the history of the Party—compared to all previous textbooks on the *History of the VKP(b)*! While reading this chapter, I became acutely aware of the shortcomings in my own work in this area. You know that I am not a flatterer, so please do not misinterpret my enthusiasm!¹⁸

In earlier letters dated August 17 and August 22, 1938, Pospelov and Yaroslavsky had simply written “Stalin.” Now, they wrote the leader’s name exclusively in capital letters: “STALIN.”

Neither the Politburo members nor Pospelov and Yaroslavsky expressed great enthusiasm or serious objections regarding Chapters V and VI. No notes or insertions by Stalin concerning these chapters have survived. Stalin is also barely mentioned in them. These chapters covered the period from the spring of 1912 to the spring of 1917. As is known, Stalin spent the greater part of this time in exile in the Turukhansk region.¹⁹ Based on the writing style, one might surmise that Stalin authored only one section of

¹⁸ *Voprosy istorii*, 2003, No. 3, pp. 9–10.

¹⁹ Turukhansk is a village located more than 700 miles north of Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, near the Arctic circle. —*T.D.*

Chapter V: “The Theory and Tactics of the Bolshevik Party on Questions of War, Peace, and Revolution.”

Chapter VII of the *Short Course* deals with the preparation and execution of the October Revolution. It is the central and longest chapter of the textbook. Even in the final draft, the entire chapter is heavily annotated by Stalin. Many phrases are crossed out. Stalin wrote insertions over the original text, in the margins, and at the bottom of the pages. Earlier typewritten drafts of this chapter have not survived. It is evident, however, that Stalin personally wrote all the theoretical sections of this chapter.

A letter from P. Pospelov dated September 4, 1938, confirms this; the author was particularly impressed by the theoretical component of Chapter VII:

The characterization of the principal causes that determined the victory of the socialist revolution in Russia is particularly remarkable for its theoretical depth and vivid exposition.

Pospelov draws a sharp distinction between his own work and Stalin’s, apologizing for oversights he made in presenting the “factual material.”²⁰

Chapter VIII of the *Short Course* deals with the Civil War and foreign military intervention. In the draft of this chapter, Stalin made no comments and proposed no insertions. He merely crossed out one passage—from Section 1—regarding the German occupation of Ukraine in the spring of 1918. Another sentence was retained: “Germany did not and could not participate in this intervention by the Anglo-Franco-Japanese-American bloc, if only because it was at war with that bloc.” The sentence is typically Stalinist in style. Judging by the content and the nature of the exposition, the entire eighth chapter was written by Stalin. In his review, Pospelov wrote: “Chapter VIII makes just as strong an

²⁰ *Voprosy istorii*, 2002, No. 3, p. 16.

impression as the preceding ones.” He would hardly have dared to write that about his own work. Pospelov ventured to make only two “minor comments” regarding the factual content of Chapter Eight. Neither of these comments was accepted by Stalin. Section 3 of Chapter VIII cited a folk ditty about Kolchak:

Mundir angliiskii / Pogon frantsuzskii

[British uniform / French epaulettes]

Tabak iaponskii / Pravitel' Omskii

[Japanese tobacco / Ruler of Omsk]

Pospelov wrote to Stalin suggesting a clarification: the phrase “French-style shoulder boards” should be corrected to “Russian-style shoulder boards.” The author of the letter cited a book about the Civil War published in 1932. Pospelov had not taken part in the Civil War, but Stalin remembered the song about Kolchak well and made no such corrections.

When I was a student at the Faculty of Philosophy at Leningrad State University, we were required to memorize many sections of the *Short Course*, including the final section of Chapter VIII. This section outlined eight reasons for the Red Army’s victory in the Civil War. We would hardly have memorized such texts had we not been absolutely certain that Stalin himself had written them. After all, who but Stalin could have compiled the *Short Course*’s list of heroic Civil War commanders—a list that includes Voroshilov, Budyonny, Lazo, Chapaev, and Parkhomenko, yet omits Tukhachevsky, Yakir, Bliukher, Egorov, and Filipp Mironov? Nor does Chapter VIII say very much about Stalin’s own role. In the analysis of the reasons for the Red Army’s victory, Stalin’s name appears only in the list of individuals “engaged in the political education of the Red Army.” Only one author could afford such modesty at the time—Stalin himself.

Everything said above regarding Chapter VIII of the *Short Course* could also be said of Chapters IX and X. These chapters dealt with the NEP, Lenin's cooperative plan, the "Workers' Opposition," the formation of the USSR, Lenin's death, the activities of the Trotskyists, the "New Opposition" led by Zinoviev and Kamenev, and the Party's course toward socialist industrialization. Not only the theoretical sections but also all the facts, examples, assessments, and even the tone undoubtedly originated with Stalin himself. In the final typescript of these chapters, Stalin made virtually no insertions, adding only a few new quotations from Lenin. Pospelov's enthusiastic review covered both Chapters IX and X and was written on the same day—September 4, 1938—as his review of Chapters VII and VIII. Pospelov's letter is replete with phrases such as "vividly demonstrated," "a stirring picture of the struggle," "remarkably portrayed," and so forth. E. Yaroslavsky limited himself to a few additions and corrections regarding the factual content of Chapters IX and X. The very nature of these corrections, most of which were not incorporated, demonstrated that neither Yaroslavsky nor Pospelov was the author of these pages of the *Short Course*.²¹

Chapter XI was devoted to the struggle of the VKP(b) for the collectivization of agriculture. This chapter explained and justified both the policy of wholesale collectivization and the liquidation of the kulaks "as a class." All these forced transformations are characterized as a revolution "from above," "equivalent in its consequences to the revolutionary upheaval of October 1917."

Chapter X speaks very briefly and vaguely about the "bureaucratic distortions" and "excesses" committed at the local level during collectivization "in defiance of direct instructions from the Central Committee." These distortions were rectified thanks to Stalin, whose article "Dizzy with Success" was of

²¹ *Voprosy istorii*, 2002, No. 3, p. 21.

“immense political significance and dealt a crushing blow to the enemies of Soviet power.”

Chapter XI discusses the decisions of both the 16th and 17th Congresses of the VKP(b), the successes of industrialization, and the results of the First Five-Year Plan. This chapter mentions, very briefly and almost in passing, the final defeat of the “Right” deviation within the Party and the complete exposure of the “Bukharin–Rykov anti-Party group.” The same chapter also addresses the “heinous assassination of S.M. Kirov” by terrorists belonging to an underground counter-revolutionary group of former Zinovievites. According to the chapter’s author, the “Bukharinites” degenerated in 1934 into “political double-dealers,” while the “Trotskyists,” who were already double-dealers by that time, degenerated further into a “White Guard gang of murderers and spies.” They deserved to be treated henceforth as spies and White Guards.

Chapter XI was quite brief; in it were many harsh words, even threats, and it was rife with falsifications. Stalin himself made about 60 notations, insertions, and deletions in the draft of this chapter, using ordinary pencil, purple ink, and red pencil. Yet it was evident that he was editing a text he had written himself. The events discussed in Chapter XI were still too recent, and few would have dared to dispute Stalin. Not a single member of the Politburo offered a comment on the text of this chapter. Yaroslavsky asked to replace just one verb in the 30-page text—one he considered ill-chosen and not entirely precise: instead of the phrase “It was discovered that the First Five-Year Plan had already been fulfilled,” Yaroslavsky proposed writing, “By the beginning of 1933, the First Five-Year Plan had already been fulfilled.”

Stalin chose his own wording, writing: “It became clear that the First Five-Year Plan had already been fulfilled ahead of schedule.”

In a letter, Pospelov wrote of the “invaluable wealth of theoretical content in Chapter XI.” He proposed two minor amendments to the text, suggesting also that various “excesses” in the collectivization drive be attributed to the provocations of “disguised Trotskyist-Bukharinite double-dealers who deliberately violated Party directives in order to embitter the middle peasant and derail collectivization.”²² Yet even Stalin deemed these amendments unnecessary.

Chapter XII of the *Short Course* was also quite brief, spanning only 20 pages of the textbook. It covered the events of 1935–1937. It dealt with the onset of the Second Imperialist War, the Stakhanovite movement, and the successful fulfillment of the Second Five-Year Plan.

Section 3 of this chapter discussed the adoption of the new USSR Constitution at the Eighth Congress of Soviets. A mere 1.5 pages in Section 4 of the *Short Course*’s final chapter were devoted to the “liquidation of the remnants of the Bukharinite-Trotskyist spies, wreckers, and traitors to the motherland.” Stalin mentions only ten names: Piatakov, Radek, Tukhachevsky, Yakir, Bukharin, Rykov, Krestinsky, Rozengolts, Zinoviev, and Kamenev. He calls these men “fiends,” “White Guard vermin,” “pigmies,” and “contemptible lackeys of the fascists.”

“They forgot,” the textbook states,

that the Soviet people need only lift a finger to wipe out every trace of them. The Soviet court sentenced the Bukharinite-Trotskyist fiends to be shot. The NKVD carried out the sentence. The Soviet people approved the crushing of the Bukharinite-Trotskyist gang and turned to the tasks at hand. And the tasks at hand consisted of preparing for the elections to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and conducting them in an organized manner!²³

²² Voprosy istorii, 2002, No. 3, p. 22.

²³ *Istoriia VKP(b). Kratkii kurs*. Moscow: Politizdat, 1945; p. 332.

The final pages of the chapter, which was the last one in the *Short Course*, were devoted to the success of these elections, held on December 12, 1937.

While reviewing the final typescript version of Chapter XII, Stalin made several insertions and corrections, writing them in pencil in the margins and on the back of one of the draft pages. These remarks applied only to section 1, on the war that had broken out. No letters or comments from Politburo members, nor from Yaroslavsky or Pospelov, were found in the archives. This was the only chapter of the *Short Course* regarding which none of the project participants, or those who received the draft for review, wrote even a simple “yes, I agree” or “no objections.” Throughout August and September 1938, the terror in the country continued unabated. It was during this period that recent Politburo members such as S. Kosior, P. Postyshev, and V. Chubar, as well as candidate Politburo member R. Eikhe, were arrested. Almost all the leaders of the Komsomol Central Committee, headed by A. Kosarev, were also arrested and soon executed.

The “Conclusion” to the *Short Course* as a whole was also scarcely discussed by anyone. During Stalin’s lifetime, we all knew this text—titled “What Does the History of the VKP(b) Teach Us?”—by heart. The “Conclusion” consisted of six points. In the text under point 2, one could read the following statement:

It can be said without exaggeration that after Engels's death, the greatest theorist Lenin—and after Lenin, Stalin and other disciples of Lenin—were the only Marxists who advanced Marxist theory and enriched it with new experience under the new conditions of the class struggle of the proletariat.²⁴

This paragraph drew objections from Molotov, who proposed that the *Short Course* should more fully reflect Stalin’s role in the development of “creative Marxism.” Yaroslavsky also objected; he

²⁴ *Istoriia VKP(b). Kratkii kurs*. Moscow: Politizdat, 1945; pp. 345–6.

proposed stating in the textbook that Stalin had advanced Marxist theory not “after Lenin,” but “alongside Lenin since the late 1890s.” This proposal was not adopted.

Judging by published documents, Stalin began working on the “Conclusion” as early as April 1938, when the first typewritten drafts of the *Short Course* were being brought to him. He made the final insertions into the text of the “Conclusion” in early September 1938—that is, just before the *Short Course* was published in the newspaper *Pravda*.²⁵

Many pages of the “Conclusion” remain worth reading today if we wish to understand the reasons behind the collapse of the CPSU in 1991, as well as many of its other failures in preceding years. This applies above all to Point 5, in which Stalin wrote:

The history of the Party further teaches that the Party cannot fulfill its role as the leader of the working class if, carried away by success, it becomes conceited; if it ceases to notice shortcomings in its work; if it fears to admit its mistakes and fears to correct them openly and honestly in good time.

Point 6 is also highly instructive; it states that “the Party perishes if it withdraws into its narrow party shell, if it becomes divorced from the masses, and if it becomes encrusted with bureaucracy.”

The gap between word and deed was one of the most characteristic features of what we today call “Stalinism,” and this discrepancy between rhetoric and action became one of the primary causes of the CPSU’s collapse.

Promoting the *Short Course*

²⁵ *Voprosy istorii*, 2002, No. 12, pp. 21–6.

An active campaign to promote the *Short Course* was launched across the country immediately after the first chapters of the textbook were published in *Pravda*. As early as September 10–11, some Party organizations began holding collective readings of the new textbook, chapter by chapter. Within the Party’s ideological apparatus and among social science instructors, the new textbook was greeted not merely with close attention but even with a degree of enthusiasm. This reaction was understandable. The repressions of 1937–1938 had wreaked havoc—and not only on the Party’s personnel. Many ideological constructs crucial to the country, those intended to reinforce the foundations of the socialist state, had clearly been weakened. An invisible yet massive breach had opened in the hull of our Soviet ship, and the *Short Course* served as the patch that effectively covered it, allowing the vessel not only to stay afloat but to keep moving forward. Everyone involved in ideological work sensed this almost instinctively; they had found a new source of support and had no desire to ask unnecessary questions.

This was precisely the atmosphere that prevailed at a major conference of Party propaganda officials from Moscow and Leningrad, which began at the Central Committee of the VKP(b) on September 27, 1938. A.A. Zhdanov addressed the gathering with a report titled “On the Study of the *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*.” The ensuing discussion was filled entirely with expressions of enthusiastic praise. This was hardly surprising, given that Stalin himself was seated in the presidium. Appearing irritated, he unexpectedly took the floor.

“Why was this conference convened?” Stalin asked, halting the wave of applause.

This is not a mass rally, comrades. Why are you wasting time with applause? You’ve all been heaping praise on the book—saying it’s this and that, that it covers everything, and so on. We don’t need praise here; we need help in the form of corrections, observations, and guidance

drawn from your experience in propaganda work. That is what is needed—not praise or applause.

“The book being published,” Stalin explained,

is merely a short course. Its focus is on theoretical questions. This was a specific assignment from the Central Committee. Until now, our history of the Party was written from a different perspective—not to disparage the authors of history textbooks; I do not wish to run them down... But the path our textbooks followed was nonetheless unsuitable. It was an approach based on educating people through the lens of specific individuals, glorifying those figures. We were presented with a draft textbook, and we completely overhauled it. The draft was built around personalities: who behaved heroically, who escaped from exile and how often, who suffered for the cause, and so on and so forth. Can a textbook be built on that? Can cadres be trained that way? Cadres must be trained on ideas, on theory. And what is theory? Theory is the knowledge of the laws of historical development. If that knowledge exists, then cadres exist; if people lack that knowledge, they are not cadres—they are empty shells.

Stalin reiterated this thesis several times during his speech. He also emphasized that the new book was not addressed to rank-and-file factory workers or ordinary office employees. But it was not intended solely for the leadership cadre either—it was to be studied primarily by the student youth, for “they are the future command staff of our entire state.” The book had to be read by everyone working in the administrative apparatus and by the entire command staff of the army. It was especially important for teachers to study the book. “After all, we have 500,000 teachers, and they constitute the command cadre for shaping people’s consciousness,” Stalin exclaimed.

“In every collective farm,” Stalin noted, “there are five people who ought to read the book.” Stalin even specified a “target figure” [*kontrol'naia tsifir'*]⁷—8 million people who should receive the book.

“We must launch a new drive for Bolshevization among these people,” Stalin said in parting. “Well, that’s all for now; we’ll discuss the substance of the matter later!”²⁶

This was an impromptu speech, and the text was not published until 2003.

The conference of propagandists lasted several days, and Stalin followed it closely—both in the hall and through the transcripts. Stalin’s notes made during the discussions have survived, as has the outline for his concluding speech, for which he had prepared very thoroughly. He delivered this speech on October 1, once again expressing his dissatisfaction. “The criticism at the conference,” he said, “was unserious and superficial. The speakers merely skimmed the surface.” Yet, Stalin immediately dismissed even the superficial remarks that had been made. Some of them he rudely dismissed as nonsense. Even when acknowledging that certain criticisms were valid, he pointed to the textbook’s brevity: “The size of the textbook did not allow for more to be said.” Stalin identified one of the textbook’s primary tasks as eliminating the gap between the study of Marxism and the study of Leninism that had existed prior to 1938.

“In the past, you based your curricula on Stalin’s book *Foundations of Leninism*,” said Stalin himself, continuing:

But that is no longer sufficient. *Foundations of Leninism* had a narrow scope, whereas the *Short Course* has a broader one. Lenin stood on the shoulders of Marx and Engels. To understand Leninism, one must read Marx’s *Capital*. Marxism-Leninism is a unified whole that must not be broken.

True to form, Stalin outlined six key objectives that the new textbook on the history of the VKP(b) was to fulfill. The primary task among these was the exposition, or even further development, of the theory of Marxism-Leninism.

²⁶ *Voprosy istorii*, 2003, No. 4, pp. 5–9.

Stalin also addressed several theoretical issues. Chief among them was the question of the “withering away of the state” under socialism. He spoke of the erroneous or inadequate nature of certain propositions put forward by F. Engels on this subject—even though everyone was aware of similar, or even more definitive, statements regarding the “withering away” of the state made by both Marx and Lenin. Prior to the revolution, this had been one of the core programmatic ideas of Marxism: that a genuine socialist society must dispense with both private property and the state. Both were viewed as evils that give rise to antagonistic societies. Now, however, Stalin argued that socialism, whether in a single country or a group of countries, required a strong and powerful state.

Many of Stalin’s other remarks were also significant for his audience, such as his comments on the role of the family and the correct usage of terms like “means of production,” “instruments of production,” and “productive forces.” Only a new “paragon” [*klassik*] of Marxism-Leninism could have presumed to correct, in certain respects, the three founding “paragons” who had preceded him.

Stalin’s words regarding the new character and role of the intelligentsia in Soviet society were also of great importance at the time. Within the power apparatus, the intelligentsia was still viewed as a sort of semi-bourgeois “stratum.” Stalin now proposed a shift in attitude toward the Soviet intelligentsia. “We must put an end to the hooligan-like attitude toward our own intelligentsia,” he declared quite sharply.²⁷

On October 10 and 12, a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) took place, focusing on issues of party propaganda in the wake of the publication of the *Short Course*. Typically, Politburo meetings were not stenographically

²⁷ *Voprosy istorii*, 2003, No. 4, pp. 5–9.

recorded, with documentation limited to brief working notes. However, this particular meeting involved an expanded roster of attendees, including the heads of propaganda departments from numerous regional party committees, as well as senior officials from the Central Committees of the Communist Parties of Ukraine and Belarus. Consequently, a stenographic record was made of all speeches and reports. Stalin spoke several times during the meeting and posed questions to other participants. The most significant of Stalin's remarks from this expanded Politburo session were not published until April 2003, when they appeared in the journal *Voprosy Istorii*.

Stalin reiterated several times that the history of the VKP(b) and dialectical materialism could not be studied in isolation—that Marxism could not be fragmented.

“The new *Short Course* is a remarkable book because it unites all of this. That is the whole point, the whole secret,” Stalin declared. The *Short Course* was not merely a history, nor simply a presentation of facts and chronology:

The history of the Party itself is used here as illustrative material for a coherent exposition of the fundamental ideas of Marxism-Leninism. The historical material serves a subordinate function.

Everyone present at the Politburo meeting simply nodded in agreement with these highly questionable propositions. Certain other formulations of Stalin's were also somewhat obscure: “Theory is the law of history,” and “History focused on individuals contributes nothing to the training of our cadres; history must be focused on ideas.”

Stalin demanded “less interest in individual figures and leaders,” even though at that very time a leader cult was being instilled in the country and the Party—a cult of Stalin himself. Stalin once again called for an attentive attitude toward the new

Soviet intelligentsia. Pointing to Nikita Khrushchev, who was seated at the Politburo table, Stalin remarked, amidst the laughter of those present, “Comrade Khrushchev thinks he is still a worker, yet he is an intellectual: he lives by his intellect, works with his mind, has moved away from manual labor, and has left the ranks of the workers.” At the very height of the brutal repressions of 1937–1938 that afflicted Party and state cadres, Stalin declared: “Our Party, Soviet, and economic cadres are all wonderful [*zamechatel'nye*] people.” To some extent, this was a signal for termination the repressions—which were indeed halted in November 1938, though not entirely.

However, having praised the Party and state cadres, Stalin immediately criticized them as well, noting that many saboteurs and spies had been found within their ranks:

We won over the people, the peasantry, and the working class... That alone explains why we were able to sweep away yesterday's People's Commissars and their deputies so easily. Having won over the people, we neglected the cadres. We must acknowledge this fact and correct the error. How do we correct it? Through the political and theoretical training of our administrative cadres.... And that begins with the publication of the *Short Course* on history.

Stalin's speeches at the Politburo meeting formed the basis of a very lengthy special resolution by the Central Committee of the VKP(b) titled “On the Organization of Party Propaganda in Connection with the Release of the *Short Course on the History of the VKP(b)*.” This resolution was published in all Party journals and newspapers and was also issued as a separate pamphlet with a print run of 1.3 million copies. The text of the resolution was meticulously prepared by a large commission led by A. Zhdanov and P. Pospelov. It was an extensive document, spanning 23 pages of printed text. It outlined six objectives set by the Central Committee of the VKP(b) in creating the *Short Course on the*

History of the VKP(b), as well as three major shortcomings in the Party's previous propaganda and theoretical work. Measures to rectify the situation and reorganize Party propaganda were set forth in 26 points. The style and character of the resolution made it evident that, in this instance too, Stalin himself had written or dictated significant portions of the document, but the key words within it were these:

The course on the history of the Party is a scientific history of Bolshevism. It was necessary to provide the Party with a unified guide to its history, a guide presenting an official interpretation of the fundamental issues of the history of the VKP(b) and of Marxism-Leninism, vetted by the Central Committee and allowing for no arbitrary interpretations. The publication of the *Course on the History of the VKP(b)*, approved by the Central Committee, puts an end to the arbitrariness and confusion in the presentation of Party history, to the profusion of differing viewpoints and arbitrary interpretations regarding crucial questions of Party theory and history that characterized a number of previously published textbooks on Party history.²⁸

Formally, the resolution was signed on November 14, 1938. However, as early as September 1938, all earlier books and textbooks on the history of the VKP(b) had been withdrawn from libraries. For many years, the *Short Course* became the sole manual on Party history, and every word in the book was to be accepted as the ultimate truth. Thus, a new “sacred book,” a new “sacred scripture”—the “Bible of Communism”—was born in our country.

According to official publishing data, between 1938 and 1953, the *Short Course* was published 301 times, with a total print run of 42.8 million copies in 67 languages.²⁹ The vast majority of these

²⁸ *KPSS v rezoliutsiiakh*. Seventh edition. Moscow: 1954. Vol. 3, p. 316. /// This resolution does not appear to be part of the final, “revised and expanded” 9th edition of this basic work, published in 1985. —*T.D.*

²⁹ N. Maslov, “*Kratkii kurs istorii VKP(b)*—entsiklopediia kul'ta lichnosti Stalina” in *Surovaia drama naroda*. Moscow: 1989; p. 334.

editions, naturally, were in Russian. Most copies of the *Short Course* were printed on basic paper with inexpensive bindings. However, a limited-run gift edition was also produced. According to historian B. Ilizarov, these volumes were larger than standard size and bound in dark crimson brocade. They were printed on high-quality coated paper using a beautiful, large typeface. One such copy Stalin decided to give to his son Vasily for his 18th birthday—an inscription in soft red pencil reading “To Vasya from Stalin” bears witness to this. Yet, in that very same copy, Stalin also used red pencil to underline every passage referring to Lenin. Everything relating to Martov and the Mensheviks, as well as other opposition figures, was underlined in dark lilac pencil. Other sections of the text were underlined in violet, blue, green, and standard graphite pencils, respectively. Throughout the book, primarily in the margins and at the bottom of the pages, Stalin drew a multitude of symbols, lines, and circles. He took the trouble to mark up all 300 pages of the book right to the very end using various colored pencils, spending many hours on the task.

B. Ilizarov describes this practice of doodling as “a bit odd.” In all likelihood, this was precisely how Stalin wished to emphasize the book’s unique character and its almost biblical formulations regarding the struggle between good and evil, light and darkness. Good, of course, was represented by the Bolsheviks. But evil encompassed former socialists and former Bolsheviks who had allegedly betrayed the common cause. All members of the Politburo and the Central Committee of the VKP(b), regional party committee secretaries, senior officials of the central committees of national communist parties, and leaders of foreign communist parties received such presentation copies of the *Short Course*—though these lacked Stalin’s hand-markings. Stalin loved this book, which was intended—for the majority of party members—to replace all other works on Marxism, Leninism, and the history of

the VKP(b). Stalin himself maintained that only the highest echelon of party cadres should study Marxism-Leninism through primary sources—for everyone else, the new “holy scripture” sufficed. In essence, the publication of the *Short Course* and the mass terror of 1937–1938 marked the end of the party that could be termed the “Leninist party.” The formation of a new party, one that could be called Stalinist, was now complete. Indeed, many official documents began referring to the party as “Leninist–Stalinist.”

After Stalin’s Death

After Stalin’s death, and even more so after the 20th Party Congress, the CPSU’s *Short Course* was no longer published or studied. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the book drew criticism that ranged from harsh to relatively restrained. Yet, even during those decades, the study of Party history and Marxism-Leninism remained the foundation of the CPSU’s ideological work. No fundamental ideological shifts occurred, and the majority of opposition leaders were not rehabilitated. New textbooks and courses on the history of the VKP(b) and the CPSU were released under various editorships; however, the general frameworks and key assessments regarding major events in Soviet and Russian history, as well as the history of the Party itself, were largely derived from the *Short Course*. CPSU members could be educated and indoctrinated only through accounts of the Party’s successes, victories, and great achievements, all while reiterating the core dogmas of Marxism-Leninism. Any alternative approach would have required creating a new ideology, thereby fundamentally altering the very doctrine of socialism and communism.

But in the 1950s and 1960s, there was not a single person within the CPSU leadership capable of resolving, or even grasping

and presenting to the Party, such a task. The entire *History of the VKP(b)* in its Stalinist variant was built around describing and explaining how the Bolsheviks managed to crush all other socialist and social-democratic parties “operating within the ranks of the working class and pushing the backward strata of the working class into the arms of the bourgeoisie”—namely, the Socialist-Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, Anarchists, and nationalists. Subsequently, the Bolsheviks had to wage an “irreconcilable struggle against opportunists and capitulationists within their own ranks.”

“The history of the development of our Party's internal life,” Stalin wrote in the conclusion to the *Short Course*,

is the history of the struggle against and the rout of opportunist groups within the Party—the ‘Economists,’ Mensheviks, Trotskyists, Bukharinites, and national-deviationists. Had we not routed the Trotskyists and Bukharinites, we could not have prepared the conditions necessary for building socialism.³⁰

But what could possibly be altered in these extremely rigid and spurious schemes without dismantling the entire concept, the whole narrative arc, and all the fundamental tenets of the *Short Course*? And who could have done it? By the mid-1950s, the USSR had seen the emergence not only of a vast army of propagandists and instructors raised on the belief in the infallibility of Stalin and his *Short Course*, but also of an entire academic discipline dedicated to the history of the VKP(b), complete with its own institutes and research centers in every Union republic. Major centers for the study of the history of the VKP(b) were established in Moscow and Tbilisi. Just as with “Michurin biology,” Stalinist Party history spawned a vast army of well-compensated scholars: more than a dozen academicians and corresponding members of the USSR Academy of Sciences, hundreds of Doctors of Science,

³⁰ *Istoriia VKP(b). Kratkii kurs*. Moscow: Politizdat, 1945; pp. 344–5.

and thousands of Candidates of Science. For all these individuals, the rehabilitation of Bukharin and Trotsky would have meant the same thing that the rehabilitation of classical genetics, and the recognition of the reality and significance of genes in heredity, meant for the supporters and followers of Trofim Lysenko.

By 1958, the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of the CPSU had already prepared a substantial new textbook on the history of the CPSU. While it altered many points of emphasis and evaluation, it left the essence and fundamental principles of the *Short Course* intact. Events in the Party's history prior to 1937 were recounted here not in twelve chapters, but in thirteen. Five additional chapters covered the years 1937–1957, including the 20th Congress of the CPSU—though the latter was discussed only very briefly. The new textbook was produced by a team of authors led by Academician Boris Nikolaevich Ponomarev. In the mid-1930s, Ponomarev had served as director of the Institute of History of the VKP(b) of the Moscow Regional Party Committee and had been a member of the “brigade” of “Red Professors” who assisted V.G. Knorin in creating his series of books and textbooks on the history of the Party. By this time, however, B.N. Ponomarev was not only an academician but also a member of the CPSU Central Committee. He headed the special department of the CPSU Central Committee which was given the task of guiding and coordinating the work of the international communist movement. Naturally, following the 22nd Congress of the CPSU, it was necessary to revise many chapters of Ponomarev's textbook, which had become the primary teaching aid on the history of the CPSU for the country's higher education institutions and the entire system of Party education.

The ousting of N.S. Khrushchev and the condemnation of his “subjectivism” and “voluntarism” created new difficulties for the compilers and authors of textbooks on CPSU history. In the

mid-1960s, the USSR undertook the publication of a six-volume *History of the CPSU*, which was released over the course of several years. This publication expanded to 10 volumes and was not completed until the early 1970s. While B.N. Ponomarev's textbook was published annually with a print run exceeding one million copies, the new multi-volume work had a print run of only 75,000 copies—intended for scholars and Party activists. The team of authors and the editorial board for this textbook included all the most authoritative specialists in the history of the Party of the time: P.N. Fedoseev, B.N. Ponomarev, N.I. Maslov, I.I. Mints, L.F. Ilyichev, E.I. Bugaev, D.M. Kukin, and others. However, the chair of the main editorial board for this publication was none other than P.N. Pospelov, who at the time held the post of Director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of the CPSU. Pospelov was simultaneously a member of the CPSU Central Committee and a member of the Presidium of the USSR Academy of Sciences.

As one of the leaders of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Pospelov could oversee the work of all academic institutes in the humanities. He headed the research teams preparing a new biography of V.I. Lenin for publication, as well as the multi-volume *History of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945*. Pospelov wielded immense influence in the field of Party history, but the primary source of this influence was his close collaboration with Stalin on the creation of the *Short Course*. Unsurprisingly, he was extremely cautious and opposed any new shifts in theory or historical interpretation. In his speeches at various meetings, he continued to cite the *Short Course*. Yet, numerous references to and expressions of praise for the *Short Course* could still be found in the literature on Party history between 1981 and 1985—after Pospelov had already passed away.³¹

³¹ Pëtr Nikolaevich Pospelov was born June 8 (20), 1898, and died April 22, 1979. —T.D.

With the rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev, and especially following the proclamation of the policy of *glasnost*, it became evident that all existing textbooks on the history of the Party were hopelessly outdated. The History of the CPSU had long since become the preeminent social science in the USSR, the foundation of the humanities, and virtually synonymous with Marxism-Leninism. Courses on Party history and “scientific communism” were taught not only in universities but also in technical and medical institutes. Passing exams in these subjects was a mandatory requirement for obtaining a higher education diploma or a Candidate of Sciences degree in any field of study. However, the dogmatic nature of these ideological “super-sciences” [*sverkhnauki*] sparked protests even among students. The prestige of the numerous social science departments was plummeting, creating a serious problem for the CPSU Central Committee.

In 1987, the Secretariat of the CPSU Central Committee adopted a resolution calling for the creation of new social science textbooks. The plan was to produce and publish new texts on philosophy, political economy, and the history of the CPSU. Vadim Andreevich Medvedev was appointed to lead the team of authors for the new political economy textbook, while Ivan Timofeevich Frolov headed the team for the philosophy textbook. The commission given the task of creating *Outlines of the History of the CPSU* was chaired by M.S. Gorbachev himself. Named as his deputy on this commission was Alexander Nikolaevich Yakovlev.

Work proceeded slowly. The volume of various drafts and mock-ups soon exceeded a thousand pages, yet all attempts to synthesize this material into a coherent, unified text proved unsuccessful. Even regarding topics related to the first Russian Revolution of 1905–1907, the debate among commission members reached an impasse. The situation became even more complicated in the first half of 1988 with the official rehabilitation of N.

Bukharin, A. Rykov, G. Zinoviev, L. Kamenev, and dozens of other prominent figures of the VKP(b) who had been bypassed by all previous rehabilitations. L. Trotsky was also unofficially rehabilitated. We now learned of many new crimes committed by Stalin, including the execution of several thousand Polish officers at Katyń, the destruction of leading figures of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, and much else besides.

During 1988–1989, there was a rapid re-examination of almost all previous ideological concepts and assessments regarding collectivization, industrialization, the role of Stalin, the significance of NEP, the meaning and nature of the October Revolution itself, and key events of the Civil War. However, this process unfolded in a highly chaotic and almost haphazard manner. While boldly tearing away all the old patches from the already battered hull of our vast Soviet ship, which rested on ideological props, and kicking away those very supports, while exposing “black spots” and washing away “white spots” in our Party history, no one seemed concerned with preserving even those elements that had been built solidly, well, and to last. The ideological departments of the CPSU Central Committee continued to function, although leadership and concepts changed frequently there as well.

In October 1988, all participants in the new project concerning the history of the Party were convened at the CPSU Central Committee for a major meeting chaired by Mikhail Gorbachev and attended by A.I. Lukyanov, A.N. Yakovlev, N. Bikkenin, V. Falin, A. Cherniaev, G. Shakhnazarov, and others. Opening the meeting, Gorbachev declared that the history of the CPSU needed to be re-examined—objectively, scientifically, and based on documentation:

We stand by the socialist choice made by the country's people in 1917. But we must not be afraid to show the struggle between various forces and the clash of viewpoints.³²

No one disputed these directives from Gorbachev, yet no one knew how to put them into practice. Ultimately, it was decided to release the accounts as a series of small books. The first two books, covering events prior to October 1917, were scheduled for publication in June 1989. However, the team of authors failed to meet this deadline. For the 1989–1990 academic year, the course on the history of the CPSU and scientific communism was replaced by a course titled “Socio-Political History of the 20th Century.” Directives from the CPSU Central Committee stated that the new course could be entrusted only to university social science instructors “who had demonstrated an ability to creatively embrace the changes taking place in life.” But where could one find so many “creatively gifted” instructors? Gorbachev himself stepped back from work on the new concept and the new textbook on CPSU history, delegating the entire undertaking to Alexander Yakovlev. Manuscripts and proposals proliferated. A new monthly magazine, *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* [News of the CPSU Central Committee], began publication, featuring a wealth of historical and archival information.³³

In the summer of 1990, the journal *Kommunist* published a seminal article by A.N. Yakovlev titled “A Time for Creative Boldness.”

“You cannot fool history,” wrote the CPSU’s new chief ideologist:

³² V.A. Medvedev, *Prozrenie, mif ili predatel'stvo?* Moscow: 1998; pp. 292–9.

³³ In a thinly-disguised effort at Communist virtue-signaling, this new academic historical journal asserted continuity with a publication by the same name terminated in 1929, resuming the old series of issue numbers. —T.D.

It can be understood only through the truth. History must come alive with facts and be populated by people. We must trace the spiritual, political, and practical origins of the socialist movement in Russia and pay tribute to its heroes, naming them all individually, regardless of how their political fates played out. The history of the party must be written from a scholarly perspective.³⁴

These were fine words, but they were merely words. The task articulated by A.N. Yakovlev was utterly beyond the capacity—indeed, impossible and unrealistic—for the scholarly groups existing in the country at the time. Nevertheless, the autumn of 1990 saw the start of a new series of meetings. I myself took part in one of them, having briefly become a member of the CPSU Central Committee and been assigned to one of its ideological commissions. I was also invited to contribute to the journal *Kommunist* and the newspaper *Pravda*.³⁵ At that time, no one was dictating anything to anyone or imposing their will. Yet, there was no sign of creative boldness anywhere, either. A mood of bewilderment and despondency reigned in the editorial offices of party journals and newspapers, as well as within the CPSU Central Committee apparatus itself. For the hundreds of thousands of people engaged in teaching and propagating party ideology, a time had arrived when familiar concepts and values were rapidly collapsing.

Certainly, new and interesting work was being done in the field of CPSU history, and Mikhail Gorbachev never tired of repeating that “the process is underway.” Yet, another process was moving even faster during 1990–1991: the disintegration of the CPSU itself and of the USSR as a whole. Consequently, a new textbook on the history of the CPSU was never produced.

³⁴ *Kommunist*, 1990, No. 10, p. 12.

³⁵ *Kommunist* was the official theoretical journal of the CPSU, *Pravda* was the Party’s official daily newspaper. —T.D.



Roy Aleksandrovich Medvedev was born in Tbilisi on November 14, 1925. In 1938, his father, a brigade commissar of the Red Army and a participant in the civil war, was arrested and in 1941 died in the Kolyma mines. He was posthumously rehabilitated. R.A. Medvedev was drafted into the Soviet Army in February 1943

and served in units of the Transcaucasian Front until 1945. In 1946–1951, he studied at the philosophy department of Leningrad University. In 1951–1957, He worked as a history teacher and director of a rural school. He joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. In 1969, he was expelled from the party for his book about Stalin, *Let History Judge*. He was reinstated in 1989. From 1957 to 1971, he worked at the Prosveshchenie publishing house, then at the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. Since 1971, as a freelancer, he wrote books and articles on history, pedagogy, sociology, literary studies, and philosophy. The author of more than 40 books in Russian, many of which have been translated into 14 languages and published in separate editions in 20 countries. From 1989 to 1991, Medvedev was a People's Deputy of the USSR and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. After 1991, he was been co-chairman of the Socialist Party of Toilers of the Russian Federation and was active in socio-political, scientific, and literary activities.

Comrade Medvedev died February 13, 2026 at the age of 100.

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